

Tough trek to success

Starting from scratch, these New Yorkers get biz up to speed

BY MILDRED L. CULP

The best idea means nothing without the cash to get it off the ground. That's the dilemma facing countless entrepreneurs. Even if they get going, money restrictions often means not having enough employees to handle even small tasks.

Your Money spoke with three New Yorkers who remember their tough beginnings. Two helped ease the initial burden by freelancing. All three have made it.

BENTLEY MEEKER

Lighting design

What does silence sound like? Bentley Meeker remembers it well. He started his business amid an economic storm – the recession of 1990.

“Nothing was happening,” he said. “My phone never rang. We made calls and got no responses. ... It was brutal.”

Fortunately, he'd launched Bentley Meeker Lighting & Staging at a cost of just \$480. After a few months, he landed his first gig, netting \$1,200.

For a few years, Meeker, 42, of Harlem, took a taxi to events, with lights in the trunk, on the back seat next to him and in the front next to the driver. At the end of a job, he'd load up a taxi for the ride home.

As time went on, and Meeker freelanced on the side, business started to roll in for his specialized services.

Now boasting 35 employees and offices in Hell's Kitchen, he's made sure the lighting was just so at celebrity weddings (Catherine Zeta Jones and Michael Douglas, Rudy Giuliani and Judith Nathan), corporate announcements (the new Google phone, the Microsoft Windows 7 launch) and A-list soirees (Warner Brothers' Grammy party).

He's worked on movie sets (“Sex and the City,” “Where the Wild Things Are”) and on Broadway (“Guys and Dolls”).

His next act? His book on lighting design is set to be published in October.

LAURA GELLER

Cosmetics executive



TANYA BRAGANTI

Bentley Meeker (above) used to transport gear by taxi. Carles Guillot (r.) started his biz after getting a green card.

the city, some New Yorkers use the basement.

Laura Geller opened a small makeup shop, Laura Geller Makeup, in 1993 with less than \$20,000 to cover the cost of building a store.

She worked out of the basement of the makeup studio for 11 years. To help keep up cash flow, she did freelance work for six years.

Geller managed to move out of the basement six years ago, but had to share a cramped suite with 12 employees. Last summer, she finally could make the move into a her own corporate office in midtown.

“I was hard-working, so I wasn't poor,” said Geller, 51, of the Upper East Side. “But it was tough. The work was endless, as much as 80 hours per week, doing the books at night and working



DAVID HANDSCHUH/DAILY NEWS

Cosmetics exec Laura Geller worked out of a basement for years.



JAMES KEVOM/DAILY NEWS

CARLES GUILLOT

Financial services

“I didn't realize that time was passing by so quickly because I love it so much,” she added. “I felt fortunate to pay the bills, sometimes begging vendors and borrowing from Uncle Moe, cousins Ivy, Sarah and Nancy to pay the next rent bill, but always managing to pay everyone back.”

In 1997, Geller aligned with QVC and had to find a place, and the people, to pack kits.

“I opened a bridge table in the back of the store,” she said. “My mother called all of her cronies from childhood” to pack.

Results began to appear in 1999. Then they soared. In 2009, Geller and her 25 employees and consultants pulled in retail sales of about \$56 million.

“We work very lean and I'm very cautious about the money I spend. These are old-school policies I haven't been able to shake.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Carles Guillot left Paris hoping to find opportunity in New York.

He worked in business development for three years but spent evenings and weekends trying to get his own business going.

Once he got a green card, Guillot, 37, of lower Manhattan, quit and started Plastyc, a debit card business aimed at teens. Amid heavy skepticism, he said he managed to raise \$200,000.

Plastyc's Upside Prepaid Visa card for teens 13 to 18 relies on parents to deposit money. For 18- to 25-year-olds, iBankUP offers similar features and allows customers to write checks online.

“It took about a year to issue a few thousand cards – then there was a snowball effect,” he said. “We're at 40,000 cards, issuing